

Gate A23 by rosekings

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Summary:

When all of Denver International Airport's flights are delayed, El and Max are stuck for the night.

Gate A23

“I’ll be there soon, Dad. I promise. The flights are crazy.”

“Well, I’m going to bed, so if you come in before morning just let yourself in. You have a key, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright. See you soon, kid.”

El hangs up with a sigh, leaning her forehead against the frosty window. Outside of the Denver International Airport, all the airplanes are stagnant in the blizzard. The snowflakes are whipping back and forth across the tarmac, taunting the planes to just try and spread their wings.

El was supposed to be in her dad’s warm cabin in Indiana four hours ago, but thirty minutes before her connection took off, the clouds rolled in over the entire Denver metropolis and deposited their avalanches of snow onto the city. All of the incoming flights got rerouted, and all upcoming departures were delayed indefinitely. Now it’s almost one in the morning, two days before Thanksgiving, and El’s exhausted. She’s thought about getting a room for the night, but she doesn’t really have the money for it, and she definitely doesn’t want to fall in an airport and leave her bags unattended, so sleep isn’t an option at the moment.

She turns around, surveying the seating in gate A23. It’s entirely empty - there’s not even an attendant behind the desk. Who the hell goes to Indiana, anyways? The rows of chairs merge with A24’s chairs, and that gate is a little more occupied. El sits down, kicks her feet up, and puts an earbud in, observing the gate next door. There’s an old man with wispy gray hair who seems to be asleep, a middle-aged couple who are leaning on each other, fighting to keep their eyes open, and a redhead girl who looks to be about El’s age. She’s staring out the window, mouthing along to whatever song is playing through the bright blue headphones over her ears. El glances up at the screen over A24’s desk. It’s a flight to Los Angeles, delayed to an unknown date.

As El watches the redhead, she comes to the conclusion that this girl is really pretty. Like, *really* pretty. And she looks *adorable* when she does a little dance move in her seat. El's debating getting up and going to talk to her, but her extreme shyness butts in and her phone buzzes before she can make a decision.

Will, 12:48am: are you okay?

El, 12:49am: yes. stuck in Denver. the flight was delayed indefinitely.

Max isn't even close to exhaustion. If she's being honest with herself, she surpassed exhaustion an hour ago and her second wind (or hysteria) is just now peaking. She's got some angry eighties music blasting through her headphones, the snowstorm outside has her sufficiently captivated, and she's feel great, if not mildly irritated.

Her connection from Denver to Los Angeles got delayed. Shocker. She should've been at a party with her friends in Beverly Hills two hours ago, but the wicked winds of the west decided otherwise. She used to be pleased by the sight of snow after living in California for so long, but at the current moment, it's an extreme inconvenience.

Her gate is pretty empty. The old man who offered her a pamphlet on Mormon conversion earlier is now passed out and snoring, and the couple that argued for a bit about whether or not to leave the airport have seemingly decided that their chairs are their hotel room. The rest of Denver International is fairly quiet - every now and then someone will run around with their suitcase, asking if they missed their flight, and they'll get the standard response: flights delayed. Don't know when. Go to sleep.

Max glances across to the gate next door, A23. Its only occupant is a girl with curly brown hair, one earbud in and the other dangling down her dark blue sweater. Her attention is on her phone; probably texting her loved ones, letting them know she's stuck in what has to be the coldest airport ever. Max looks back to the gate's information screen - a delayed departure to Indiana. She almost laughs, turning back to the girl. *I just came from where you're going*, she thinks. *You better hope you've packed warm clothes.*

As if reading Max's thoughts, the girl looks up and meets her eyes. *Holy shit. HOLY SHIT.* She's absolutely *gorgeous*. Max has never seen anyone so striking. And it's not like she's dressed up prim and proper for an evening at the Waldorf-Astoria, either. She's just...natural. Her cheeks have a soft pink tint and she's constantly brushing her curls away from her face and she's wearing the coolest snow boots that Max has ever set eyes on and -

The moment's over, if it even *was* a moment. A23 Girl looks away and gets to her feet, shouldering her backpack and pulling her suitcase out of her gate. Max watches, dismayed, as she disappears behind the door to the women's bathroom.

Well, shit. Max wants to go talk to her, ask her why she's going to Indiana, ask her where she got those badass boots, do *anything* to get her to look at her so Max can find out what color her eyes are. What has Max got to lose, anyways? She's stuck in an airport for god knows how long, so she might as well see if she can at least make some conversation to pass the time. She grabs her backpack and her skateboard, straightens her hoodie, and heads across the airport.

El chucks her paper towel towards the trash, grinning to herself when it makes it in. She swings around to leave the bathroom, but at the same time, the door opens and El's already walking too quickly to stop her momentum. She runs smack into someone and staggers backwards, trying not to drop her backpack as she simultaneously sticks her foot in front of the door to keep it from slamming shut.

"Shit - I'm so sorry -"

El looks up to see the (very attractive) redhead girl she had been watching earlier. She's got a skateboard strapped to her backpack and her blue headphones are still over her ears. El wonders if she's forgotten they're there.

"No, don't worry about it," she says. Redhead looks at her with confusion, as if she didn't understand what El said. El hesitantly reaches out and pushes the headphones down. The other girl immediately springs into action, fumbling for her phone to pause the music. El watches with a small smile and finally the girl looks back

up, her cheeks as red as her hair. El notices that her eyes are a sparkling blue-green, like the endless Pacific Ocean that El's only seen once or twice.

"Sorry," the girl says. El laughs and shakes her head.

"It's fine." El waits for the girl to move out of the doorway, but she seems frozen there. "Um -"

"Right! Sorry." Redhead steps aside, possibly even more flustered than before.

"Quit saying sorry," El says as she goes by. The girl opens her mouth to say something, probably 'sorry,' but El just laughs and heads back to her gate, dragging her suitcase behind her.

"Are you a goddamn idiot?" Max says to herself in front of the mirror. She yanks off her headphones and shoves them in her backpack, leaving it on the row of sinks as she heads into a stall. Once she's done, she quickly washes her hands and then goes back to berating her reflection. "Sorry? *Three times?* You're Max Mayfield - since when do you stutter while talking to people? To people you *like?*"

She flicks on the tap, letting her hands overflow with cold water before splashing some on her face. She pats her face dry with a paper towel, then balls it up and clenches it tightly in her fist. "You're Max Mayfield. You're going to get your shit together," she demands, pointing to herself. "You're going to go talk to this girl, because you're both stuck in this godforsaken airport and because she's cute and because she's got dark chocolate eyes and because maybe she likes angry eighties music too."

Max takes a deep breath, hurls the paper towel into the bin, and picks up her backpack. She glares at herself in the mirror one last time before she leaves the bathroom. "Get your shit together, Mayfield."

The girl whose voice sounds like actual sunshine is back in her seat at A23, head tilted skyward with her eyes closed and her feet kicked up

on the chair across from her. Max crosses the empty space between the bathrooms and the gates and walks up next to the girl.

“Hey.”

Her head jerks up, eyes rapidly searching the area around them before settling on Max. “Hi. Hey. Did I fall asleep?”

“I think you were dozing. Mind if I sit?” Max asks, gesturing to the seat across from her.

“Oh, no, be my guest. I’m El, by the way.”

“Max.” Max drops down into the chair across the aisle, next to El’s boots, and kicks her own feet up next to El. “So, Indianapolis? It’s pretty cold there right now.”

El nods, stifling a yawn with her hand. “I’m in San Diego for college. Once I actually get to Indianapolis, I’ll drive a couple of hours to this blip on the map called Hawkins. It’s where all my family is.”

“Sounds fun. I’m the opposite - going to Indianapolis University, but my dad is in Los Angeles. Have you ever been?”

“No, is it nice?”

Max’s jaw drops in the disbelief that she’s never been to LA. “It’s - it’s amazing. The lights, and the ocean right next door, and all the people - Indiana is empty compared to LA.”

El laughs. “Yeah, I bet it is. So, what were you listening to when we ran into each other?”

Max had been so caught up in discovering El’s dark chocolate eyes that she had forgotten what was playing. She pulls her phone out, clicking on the screen. “The Runaways. They’re kind of -”

“Angry?” El suggests. Max grins, nodding.

“Yeah, angry. What do you listen to?”

El fidgets in her seat, having suddenly become very interested in her

fingernails.

“What?” Max presses.

“If you listen to The Runaways and other stuff like that, you’re going to hate what I listen to.”

Max groans, slumping in her seat. “Please don’t tell me it’s someone like Taylor Swift or Ed Sheeran.”

El picks at her pink nail polish, finally raising her head. She’s got that small smile on her face that says ‘you already know the answer.’

“Oh my god.”

El quickly finds out she *loves* talking to Max. They fly easily from topic to topic, occasionally pausing to go grab some snacks or answer a harried businesswoman’s inquiries about the flights. Several times, El finds herself losing track of what they’re talking about because she’s caught up in how Max smiles with her whole face and laughs with her whole body. When El’s phone buzzes at some small hour of the morning, she’s completely forgotten how they moved from rage-filled eighties songs versus bubblegum pop to the merits of eating breakfast food for all meals of the day.

“I just think there should be a Waffle House on every corner of every street, to promote breakfast food equality,” El says to conclude their conversation, getting to her feet with a yawn. She stretches her arms and legs, simultaneously checking her phone. “Wow, have we really talked for two and a half hours?”

She looks to Max for conversation, but Max is just staring at her with her eyelids halfway shut, her legs still stretched out across the aisle of chairs.

“Max?”

“Hm?” Her eyes slip closed another iota and El laughs, looking back at her phone.

Jonathan, 3:33am - Missed Call

She swipes the notification to call Jonathan back, and he picks up on the third ring.

“El! Where are you?”

“Stuck in Denver International. Isn’t it almost six in the morning there?”

“Yeah, I’m up for work. What’s going on? What have you been doing this whole time?”

El glances around - gate A23 is still as empty as it was earlier and the surrounding areas are just as quiet. Max’s eyes are fully closed now, her breathing heavy with the rhythm of sleep. She looks so peaceful and relaxed, a big contrast to the fiery ball of hyperkinetic energy that she is when she’s awake. El smiles to herself, remembering how often Max would wave her hands around and then whack one into the chair while going off on a rant.

Jonathan’s voice crackles through the phone, bringing El back to the present. “El? Are you there?”

“Yeah, sorry. The flights are still delayed, and -” El turns to look out the window. “ - it’s still snowing. I met this girl, so we’ve been talking since one-ish. Before that, I wasn’t really doing anything.”

“That sucks. Do you want me to take off work and pick you up? It might be quicker -”

“Jonathan, it’s a thousand miles from here to there - that’s a fifteen hour drive. I’m sure it’ll quit snowing soon.” El stares out the window at the snow-covered tarmac and the immobile planes, watching the blizzard wreak its havoc on the airport. “How are you and Steve and Nancy?”

“We’re good. They’re both here for Thanksgiving.”

“What about Joyce and my dad?”

“Still dancing around each other. Nothing’s changed since you were here last.”

“Figures. Well, I’ll text you when I get on the plane.”

“Okay. Be safe. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Jonathan hangs up and El puts her phone away. She glances around the airport once more. It’s only 3:45 - it could be hours until the snow lets up. El sighs, looking at Max. It’s tempting to follow her lead and crash for a while. The airport is so empty...surely their luggage will be okay if El gets just an hour or two of sleep, right? The couple and the old man at A24 have been passed out for hours now, and their stuff is still there.

El hesitates a moment longer, but finally the weight on her eyelids forces her hand. She pushes her stuff over to Max’s backpack, shoves it all under the seat, and sits down next to Sleeping Beauty. Stretching her legs out across the seat, she leans her head against Max’s shoulder, closing her eyes.

“Who was that?” Max mumbles. Apparently she wasn’t as asleep as El thought.

“Jonathan. My brother. Not really my brother, but close enough.”

Max makes an assenting noise and El realizes that she’s leaning on her in a way that’s pretty intimate for only three hours of being acquainted with each other.

“Is - is this okay?” El whispers.

“Mmm.”

El takes that for a yes. Soon they’re both asleep, their chests quietly rising and falling, El’s curls tangled up in Max’s long red locks as the white snowflakes whip on by outside.

Max is awoken by the sound of commuters. Her eyes slowly flicker open, taking in the scene around her. Gate A23 is a lot busier, with people filling up the seats and an actual attendant behind the desk now. Outside, the snow has stopped and people in bright orange vests

are hustling around the tarmac. A woman's voice crackles over the airport's speakers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Denver International's outgoing flights are now beginning to be rescheduled. Incoming flights will also now start to arrive here, rather than being rerouted. Please check your assigned gate for more information on your flight. We are truly sorry for the delay."

Max looks at A23's screen for El's flight time. *Oh, shit. Shitshitshit -*

"El, wake up," she says, nudging El off of her shoulder. "Come on, El, wake up!"

El sits up with a start. She rubs the sleep out of her eyes and unsuccessfully tries to push her hair away from her face. "What? What?"

Max suppresses her smile at El's freshly-awoken state and points to the screen. "Your flight leaves in twenty minutes. They've already started boarding."

That gets El's attention. She pulls herself to her feet, dragging her backpack and suitcase out from under their chairs. "What - what time is it?" she asks with a yawn.

Max tugs her phone out from her pocket as she gets up. "Six forty-five AM."

"Damn. Okay." El double-checks her stuff, and once she's reassured that she has everything, she turns to Max. "Well, I guess I have to board."

Max nods, glancing over to gate A24. Her flight to Los Angeles has been rescheduled to leave in an hour. "Thanks for hanging out with me. I think being alone in this place all night would have gotten stuffy."

"It definitely would have. Thanks for running into me in the bathroom," El answers with a grin.

"Anytime."

Max doesn't really know what to say next, considering that they'll probably never see each other again. El seems to anticipate that probability and ignores it anyways, because she grabs Max's phone from her hand, taps across it several times, and then gives it back to her. Once Max sees the screen and realizes what El's done, she looks up at her in astonishment.

"You -"

"Gotta go. See you around, Max." El smiles at her and then, before Max can say anything else, she joins the boarding queue. As she gives the attendant her pass, she glances back at Max, waving her hand. Max grins, waving back, and then El and her crazy-adorable curls disappear into the jetway.

Max gathers her things and then crosses over to gate A24. Her phone buzzes, and for a moment she thinks it's El, even though El was the one to give Max her number, not the other way around.

"Hey, Dad," she says into her phone as she joins the boarding line.

"Max! Are the flights going again?"

"Yeah, I'm boarding right now."

"Tough night?"

Max thinks back to her blizzard night filled with a pretty girl and a lot of laughter and an unreasonable amount of waffle discussion. Even though she spent ten hours in a freezing cold airport and missed her party in Beverly Hills, she now has the number of someone she genuinely likes and a head full of happy memories to keep her company on the flight.

"Honestly? I think, in the end, the snowstorm was a stroke of good luck."